

Hawaii/B&T Outsourcing Deal Causing Controversy

As part of a reengineering effort, HI State Librarian Bart Kane has enlisted the vendor to handle book selection and cataloging. Is he sacrificing librarians' expertise?

An unprecedented "outsourcing" system adopted by the Hawaii State Public Library System (HSPLS) has generated frustration among librarians there and swipes from the press—but its supporters counter that the kinks are being worked out and that the innovative project has helped increase service and save jobs.

State Librarian Bart Kane pushed for the new system as part of a comprehensive reengineering effort that also includes a new automation vendor, Ameritech. Wholesaler Baker & Taylor (B&T) signed a 5½-year contract worth \$11.2 million to supply books to the main library and 48 branches. (All Hawaii public libraries are part of the state system.) B&T charges a flat \$20.94 per book, which includes selection, cataloging, processing, and distribution.

Off to a bad start

Most complaints have focused on the selection of books, though librarians also lament the lack of opportunity to catalog and process books on their own. Earlier this year, the library's automation contract was in dispute—CARL Corp. protested that its bid wasn't evaluated—and B&T not only did not have access to the library database, but its shipments were put on hold. Meanwhile, local libraries had been given permission to use money from fines and Friends groups to purchase best sellers locally. Then B&T,

working without local information, sent duplicate best sellers.

Now that Ameritech's Dynix system is installed, those start-up problems won't recur, library and B&T officials vow. However, many Hawaii librarians have complained—in internal E-mail and in a survey conducted by HSPLS librarian Sylvia Mitchell—that B&T's central-

Hawaii librarians have complained that B&T's system sacrifices their expertise

ized buying system sacrifices their expertise and includes books inappropriate for their community. Children's and YA librarians collectively sent a memo to B&T complaining that, for example, they were sent seven times as many series-type YA fiction titles as quality YA fiction books.

Most notoriously—in an anecdote that made the local press and *Newsweek*—a proposed list for one shipment included 31 copies of *A Practical Guide to Lambs and Lambing Care*, in a state not known for its sheep population. An HSPLS review panel rejected the book. B&T senior VP Arnie Wight said the lamb care book was initially selected as part of a shipment concerned with agriculture, a topic of interest in several libraries. Wight said that profiles of the libraries' needs and interests are still being refined. "We view this as an ongoing definition," he said.

B&T's collection development group selects books at each branch based on those profiles and the contract criteria, which stipulate a standard mix of hardcovers and paperbacks, local interest and reference, etc. The contract limits standing order reference expenditures to three percent of total units—the previous spending rate, Kane says—which, given the shrinking budget, has also generated

rancor. The contract also requires B&T to devote three percent of the budget to Hawaii and Pacific Rim titles, which it buys through local vendor Booklines Hawaii. However, some librarians have complained that the contract only allows purchase of foreign-language books in Japanese, Chinese, and Filipino. Kane has responded that branches may use Friends funds to purchase other foreign-language materials.

Potential vs. pans

Can B&T get it right? Wight said that originally collection development responsibility was given solely to B&T. In September, however, the library and wholesaler began to consult local librarians via a selection advisory committee that included two librarians from the state library. Had the committee been in place earlier, "it would have helped us through the transition," Wight said. Branch librarians were added to the committee in October. But dissent among staff has not been dampened, even though in September Kane deputy Caroline Spencer ordered them not to burden office E-mail "for debates" about the outsourcing system.

The contract was criticized by the *Honolulu Advertiser* and was the subject of a panel at the October Hawaii Library Association meeting. On October 28, the state Board of Education's library committee heard further criticism of the project. One branch librarian testified that, while B&T's flat rate of \$20.94 might seem good for adult books, for less-expensive children's and YA paperbacks, it would be far better to buy the books on their own.

Meanwhile, even as librarians on several listservs question such outsourcing, B&T has received inquiries from other libraries. "[Kane] thinks this is a potential model for other libraries," Wight noted.—*Reported by Norman Oder & Susan DiMattia* □

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